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**Entangled Accountability in Development Agencies:
The Case of USAID**

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Introduction

To understand how participatory development changes accountability relationships for the donor agency, the concept of accountability must be introduced and then described within the context of development. Accountability is a fundamental issue in a democratic political system where government institutions and elected leaders are expected to answer to the citizenry and be held responsible for their performance. Accountability relationships emerge from “diverse sources wishing to promote very different perspectives, roles, and...values” and these relationships vary in the source of control (external or internal to the agency) and the degree of control.¹ There are several types of accountability relationships commonly used to describe the American political system and its government agencies.²

Professional accountability relationships involve low degrees of control and high degrees of discretion to the individual or agency being held responsible for performance. These relationships are “manifested in deference to the expertise of the administrator (or agency) who is expected to exercise discretion” in a manner consistent with the norms of the organization.³ Professional accountability can be described as a horizontal relationship because individuals are empowered by the administrator to make decisions. In contrast, accountability relationships are sometimes hierarchical and closed. This dynamic exhibits a high degree of control and scrutiny of the employee or agency and performance is based on an expectation of obedience to organizational directives.⁴ Finally, accountability relationships are political and derive from external sources and involve low levels of direct control. This type of relationship is “manifested in a high degree of discretion for the individual or agency to choose whether to respond to the expectations of...key stakeholders and to face the consequences of that decision.”⁵

¹ Romzek, Barbara S. and Radin, Beryl A. *Accountability expectations in an intergovernmental arena: the [US] National Rural Development Partnership*. Publius 26 (2), Spring 96: p59-81.

² Scholar Barbara Romzek identifies 4 types of accountability relationships. This paper refers to three types of relationships, but does not consider the fourth kind, legal accountability.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Governmental development agencies, like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), are held accountable to the government and citizens while multilateral organizations, like the World Bank, answer to their member countries that own and govern them. Another distinction between national development agencies and multilateral banks is that USAID, for example, provides direct linkage between U.S. foreign policy goals and foreign aid, while the World Bank or others need not reflect any government policy in their programs and activities.

Accountability mechanisms are layered and have many dimensions because these relationships vary by the sources of control and their relative degree of control over the agency. Accountability for development agencies, traditionally, was closed because relationships were top-down and involved strict control. Traditionally, the donor agency was held accountable *for* people in developing nations, but it was not held accountable *to* them and subsequently, it did not have to answer to them. Thus, these hierarchical relationships excluded the people affected most by development assistance – people of developing nations whom the agency intended to serve and whose interests the agency intended to promote. The agency was also held accountable *for* advancing the organization's broader goals and objectives and the outcome of the development project.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, agencies recognized that the long-term sustainability of projects depended on the commitment of people who have a stake in the project outcome and that these actors must participate in the process. They acknowledged many people were impacted (positively or negatively) by development projects and that these stakeholders should be included in the decision-making process. This important discovery dramatically changed the approach to development from one of control to one of empowerment of local stakeholders. Unlike the traditional approach that considered local skills and expertise inferior to those of the agency, this new approach started engaging people of developing nations in development programming and relying on their expertise. This paradigm shift made the process of participation a priority for most development agencies where all stakeholders share influence and power over programs, mainly those “local” and “community stakeholders” from developing nations.

The current development process, identified as participatory development or community-driven development, heavily depends on the empowerment of local people who had been excluded from the decision-making process under the traditional approach. As a result, participation demands the donor agency transfer some of its control over decisions and resources to people in developing nations who are now authorized for pieces of the implementation, operation, maintenance, and evaluation of development projects.⁶ In order to implement the participatory approach and empower local stakeholders, development agencies try to build their organizational capacity so that they can effectively administer the work for which they are now responsible.

In addition to strengthening the capacity of local stakeholders, participation creates new opportunities for people of developing nations to express their views and influence the programs that affect their lives. This commitment to engage local stakeholders and grant them some power to express their priorities for the development project modifies the relationship between the donor agency and the government and people of the host country because the agency is now accountable *to* them and they are accountable *to* the agency. Unlike the traditional approach that centralized control in the agency, the participatory approach forces the agency to answer to local stakeholders, by relinquishing some of its own control to local stakeholders so that they may participate more in resolving problems of their countries.

Agency Accountability: Dilemmas and complexities

With this new approach, national development agencies, like USAID, remain accountable to their government institutions and taxpayers, but participation creates a situation in which they are now held accountable to the host country government and its citizens and

⁶ Participation in the Country Assistance Strategies (CAS), FY00. The World Bank, 2000. Taken from the site: <http://www.worldbank.org/participation/keyconcepts>

the groups related to the work of the agency. Other stakeholders that include a vast network of national and international private organizations, both for profit and not for profit, that are contracted by the donor agency to administer and implement programs. Multilateral organizations, like the World Bank, remain accountable to their member countries, but participation results in the agency also being accountable to the borrowing member countries, to civil society organizations and the local people affected by its work, and the borrowing governments' accountability to the agency.

In contrast to the traditional and hierarchical paradigm of development that made the agency solely responsible for the project, participatory development constructs additional accountability relationships for the donor agency. These relationships can be described as horizontal because they involve less control and are non-hierarchical. Compared with vertical accountability relationships in traditional methods of development in which the agency did not have to answer to the people impacted by its operations, the horizontal relationships that arise from participatory methods force the agency to answer to non-domestic actors such as foreign citizens, host governments, international organizations, and development agencies of foreign governments. These new professional and political accountability relationships exist in addition to the agency's top-down accountability relationships with its other constituents and can be viewed as extra layers of accountability for the agency.

These efforts to collaborate with new and different stakeholders introduce challenging tensions for national development agencies, like USAID. As diverse stakeholders enjoy greater responsibility and ownership of the development project, the agency must then manage their expectations. Because each actor has different loyalties to and objectives for the development project, the agency is forced to confront and manage an array of clashing stakeholder expectations and priorities. In essence, the demands for participation complicate the agency's accountability to its constituents because the agency will have to identify gaps between expectations and make decisions that may not represent or serve the needs of its many stakeholders that it attempts to empower through participation.

Of these many new relationships, perhaps the most intriguing dynamic refers to the agency's accountability to local stakeholders and host country governments. The nature of this intergovernmental process and participatory paradigm results in agencies like USAID having to answer to citizens of foreign nations whose national interests may not reflect those of the United States. Experts who have studied the complexity of accountability in intergovernmental arenas note that "these relationships are typically between relatively autonomous parties, making the mutual accommodation of expectations more a matter of choice than command" and that "the difficulty for administrators arises when they have anticipated defending their behavior under one type of accountability mechanism while some other legitimate group is demanding answerability under another standard of accountability."⁷ That USAID's objective as a government agency is to promote U.S. national interests abroad, will certainly challenge agency employees who collaborate with non-state actors with loyalty to foreign governments.

Additional dilemmas refer to the monitoring and evaluations of programs that is complicated by participatory approaches to development. Inherent in the development agencies' internal and external accountability relationships, the agency must measure their performance and the impact of their programs. Objectives of participatory development include learning and empowerment, which are extremely difficult to quantify and measure. Nonetheless, its constituents who demand answerability for the agency's success or failure in achieving its objectives legitimately hold the development agency accountable for its performance. The agency must use indicators that measure the impact of development assistance, which can restrict the agency because its progress is affected by a host of externalities that are outside of its control.

The Case of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

Environment and Organizational Structure— early 1990s

⁷ Ibid.

In order to better understand how an agency's accountability relationships change with the participatory approach, this paper explores the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Around the same time development agencies were trying to institutionalize participation and empowerment, all public agencies came under severe criticism by the Clinton Administration. The U.S. government and the American public wanted to "reinvent government" and accused public agencies of being inefficient, wasteful, and resistant to reform. USAID, in particular, was extremely unpopular with taxpayers and reports of waste and corruption prompted an attack on the agency.

In 1991, Cable News Network (CNN) broadcasted "Profiting from Poverty" that reported a "gross mismanagement of money" of aid recipients and of USAID officials accused of receiving kickbacks from programs. Then-USAID deputy inspector general who investigates abuse in the agency was quoted saying, "Our crime rate is essentially higher than virtually any other agency of the government and higher than most major cities in the United States."⁸ In addition, a State Department report concluded "despite decades of foreign assistance, most of Africa and parts of Latin America, Asia and the Middle East are economically worse off today than they were 20 years ago."⁹

Like all public agencies, USAID was forced to undergo major administrative reforms as a result of the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993. GPRA required federal agencies to become results-oriented, by adopting private sector standards of accountability for results. Public agencies were legally obligated to develop long-term strategic plans defining general goals and objectives for their programs, to develop annual performance plans specifying measurable performance goals for all program activities in their budgets, and to publish an annual performance report showing actual results compared to each annual performance goal. Through GPRA, Congress shifted the focus of accountability to the agency so that it could answer to the public that demanded

⁸ Bering-Jensen, Henrik. *Foreign aid: From Waste to Investment*. Insight on the News, Jan. 31, 1994 v10 n5 p 6-11.

⁹ Ibid.

change. Simply put, federal agencies had to demonstrate what the programs actually accomplished with the money it spent.

Criticism of USAID and GPRA prompted major reforms in how economic aid is dispersed and pressured the agency to “streamline projects and consolidate funding to reduce fraud and of economic aid.”¹⁰ GPRA required the General Accounting Office (GAO) to annually review performance reports and plans of public agencies which, repeatedly criticized USAID. More recently, the GAO report of June 2000 acknowledged the agency has made progress in establishing outcome-oriented goals and developing targets and indicators that help measure overall results. However, the report concluded that “because the agency’s goals...are so broad and progress is affected by many factors other than USAID programs, the indicators cannot realistically serve as measures of the agency’s specific efforts.”¹¹ The report identified seven major management challenges and concluded the agency has not “set progress milestones or indicate (d) resource allocations” for addressing any of them.”¹²

Financial resources of USAID come from Congressional appropriations committees that continuously slash budget allocations to the agency and earmark up to 70% of the budget, leaving USAID with even less flexibility to decide how and where the money will be spent.¹³ Marilyn Zak, the former USAID-Dominican Republic agency director and current director of USAID-Nicaragua speaks of the mixed messages from Washington. She writes, “Unfortunately, reengineering doesn’t give us one penny more or one centavo more in resources. No matter how good we are, we’re still being cut. This is frustrating.”¹⁴ As economic resources are limited, USAID is forced to reduce its presence overseas or withdraw from countries, resulting in a greater dependency on

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ford, Jess T. *Observations on the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Fiscal Year 1999 Performance Report and Fiscal Years 2000 and 2001 Performance Plans*. Washington DC: GAO report to United States Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs, June 30, 2000.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. (Henrik Bering-Jensen)

¹⁴ Zak Marilyn. *The Participation Forum (No. 17): Real-World Participation Issues: Teamwork, Time Pressures, and Personalist Politics: The Challenge of Participation in the Dominican Republic*. Washington, DC: USAID, 1996.

partners to maintain its programs, which distances the agency even further from its customers.

One final consideration relates to the decentralized organizational structure of the agency. The USAID country mission, not USAID in Washington, determined how to comply with the institution's commitment to participation, which presented another challenge for the agency. Because country missions determine how to go about the design, implementation, and monitoring activities of participatory development, the agency as a whole was slow to change. Due to the structure of the agency, the agency's ability to respond to the "reengineering efforts" prompted by GPRA and institutionalize them in country missions was considered sluggish by some.

Participation at USAID

In 1993, former President Clinton appointed Brian Atwood the agency's new administrator who led the major reform efforts of USAID. The agency recognized a need for change and agreed cumbersome procedures prevented the agency from being very responsive to host country initiatives that made it difficult to "support dynamic processes in a society, particularly those involving the priorities and ingenuity of poor people."¹⁵ The agency implemented a series of management reforms and systematic changes that sought to empower teams of agency employees to "permit genuine partnership in USAID's working relations with host country institutions, other donors, and implementing organizations."¹⁶ USAID first reformed internally and the organization was transformed from the "traditional fragmented hierarchy model" to a more flexible system that was premised on the core values of the agency.¹⁷ The reengineering teams identified the following four core values:

¹⁵ La Voy, Diane and Charles, Chanya. *Engaging Customer Participation: USAID's Organizational Change Experience*. Washington, DC: USAID, 1998.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

1. Customer focus (rather than letting internal procedures define purposes and constrain performance)
2. Management for results (rather than by inputs)
3. Participation and teamwork (with partners, customers and also within USAID)
4. Empowerment and accountability (giving teams the necessary authority and holding them accountable for results, rather than micro-managing their actions).¹⁸

Brian Atwood centered on changing “the way we (USAID) does business” and attempted to institutionalize these values in order to strengthen staff commitment and capacity to implement participatory methods of development. He held open discussions to provide staff the opportunity to identify their best professional processes and to share ideas.

From 1994-1997, more than twenty participation forums sessions were held and summaries were distributed electronically to close to 900 staff members. Additionally, a Participation Working Group was created to provide a two-way, candid communication between agency staff and management on issues of participation, ownership, and empowerment.

Atwood’s vision of a strategic approach to development emphasized results for customers that promoted participatory approaches in all aspects of programming. In response to GPRA and as part of USAID’s “reengineering efforts” to identify, empower, and engage its “customers,” USAID identified its primary stakeholders to be “the people of developing and transitional countries who are end-users or beneficiaries of USAID programs, typically poor people.”¹⁹ The agency defined participation as “the active engagement of partners and customers in sharing ideas, committing time and resources, making decisions, and taking action to bring about a desired development objective. Participation describes both the end and the means; both the kind of results we seek, and

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ La Voy, Diane and Charles, Chanya. *Engaging Customer Participation: USAID’s Organizational Change Experience*. Washington, DC: USAID, 1998.

the way that we, as providers of development and humanitarian assistance, must nurture those results.”²⁰

To build opportunities for participation into the development process, USAID democratized its approach. In his Statement of Principles on Participatory Development, then-Administrator Atwood explained that “participation is essentially a matter of citizenship – a matter of people having access to opportunity and to the full range of their society’s decision-making processes.”²¹ He recognized that encouraging broad participation among local stakeholders does not always lead to consensus because their perspectives and objectives will differ. He added that it is this competition among interests that “lies at the heart of the democratic process...and [USAID] will strive to make that competition more and free and fair.”²² Finally, Atwood promoted valuing project sustainability when he said “unless development assistance is informed by local realities and the people who experience them daily, it will rarely succeed.”²³

The agency shifted its reform efforts in 1995 when then-Vice President Al Gore announced New Partnerships Initiative (NPI) at the UN World Summit for Social Development. NPI fostered “strategic approaches that empower local public- and private-sector actors to work effectively together.”²⁴ NPI defined USAID’s vision of sustainable development via participatory processes with “multiple society-to-society linkages” among stakeholders.²⁵ During this time, USAID not only renewed its commitment to community stakeholders, but also strengthened its partnerships with other donors, civil society organizations, businesses and governments.

USAID’s Accountability Relationships

²⁰ La Voy, Diane and Anderson, Brady J. *Participation at USAID: Stories, Lessons, and Challenges*. Washington, D.C: USAID, 1999.

²¹ Atwood, Brian. *Participation at USAID: Part Three: Enabling Participation. Statement of Principles on Participatory Development*. Washington, DC: USAID 1993.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

USAID's accountability relationship with the U.S. government can be described as vertical because the agency operates in an environment of extreme pressure and scrutiny. In this relationship, USAID is accountable to its government and the American taxpayers to promote U.S. national interests. While USAID seeks to understand local priorities independently of their own priorities, it must also focus on results to satisfy the need for accountability to the U.S. government and taxpayers that demand measurable results of performance. Despite this commitment to accountability, USAID also has its own priorities that are set forth in the strategy documents that include participation and empowerment.

The agency's limited understanding of the relationships between its programs and the contributions participation and empowerment make to the long-term desired outcomes, leaves USAID vulnerable to criticism by the U.S. government, particularly the GAO, to which the agency is accountable. These qualitative objectives are not always viewed as national objectives by the U.S. government or by USAID-Washington that works to comply with government standards and regulations. In the case of Belize, USAID employee Barbara Sandoval describes the "Increased Productivity Through Better Health," the original purpose of which was to assist in malaria and dengue control and to expand water and sanitation in rural areas.²⁶ Sandoval describes that the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Natural Resources had achieved the goals under the project, but had not done much in terms of community development. In the last year of the project, USAID decided to better engage community members "to make its impact as long-lasting as possible."²⁷ She described this participatory approach required USAID to be flexible and during the process, her team felt the need to "keep Washington out." She reported, "Some of our colleagues in Washington tried to force certain indicators on us to measure the project. These were unrelated to the capacity-building process we were going through. We said, 'That's not what we're about right now. We have only five or

²⁶ Sandoval, Barbara. *The Participation Forum (No. 5): Breathing New Life into Old Projects: Getting Down to Basics in Belize*. Washington, D.C.: USAID, 1994.

²⁷ Ibid.

six months left in the project, and we are not going to change course now. Goodbye. Thank you. Don't call us. We'll call you."²⁸

This frustration with answering to the U.S. government is shared by other employees as well. In a series of e-mail forums, Kristen Loken wrote "We must communicate the idea that if the [U.S. government] wants to have effective development programs that are valued by our counterparts and beneficiaries and that are sustainable and that ultimately benefit the U.S. as well, then the design and management of these programs must be participatory and field directed. We need to make it understood that trying to transplant American systems in other societies won't work. What will work is to address local problems and develop indigenous systems. This can't be done by a bunch of bureaucrats in Washington. We have to address this message to our colleagues in State and on the Hill."²⁹

In addition to its government, USAID is also accountable to the network of organizations with which it collaborates with on development projects. These partnerships with other groups committed to strengthening institutions and empowering people in the recipient society means that USAID must listen to their partners' views and engage in meaningful dialogues with a wide variety of stakeholders. The agency has to foster trust with its partners that its development projects serve more than U.S. national interests in order to sustain them. As previously mentioned, USAID's commitment to participation expands its accountability relationship to local stakeholders by making its projects accountable to the end user. Former Administrator Atwood described the agency's accountability to its partners when he said "providers of development assistance fail if we forget that it is their country, not ours. It is their community, not ours... We can advise, we can assist, and we can choose not to assist, but the decisions about development priorities and policies must be reached by that society at large, not by us."

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Loken, Kristen. *The Participation Forum (No. 5): Breathing New Life into Old Projects: Communications with the E-mail Bag; Advocates for Development*. Washington, D.C.: USAID, 1994.

These political and professional accountability relationships with recipient governments and foreign citizens affected by its operations and civil society and private organizations affected by its operations, creates an accountability mechanism that permits USAID’s “clients” the right to tell USAID whether the services received from the project meets their needs. The new agency directive requires that its customers and beneficiaries must be “actively consulted in developing, updating, and monitoring strategic plans, and involved in monitoring performance.”³⁰

In practice however, bottom-up participation is challenged when agency priorities are different from those of the customers. More often than not, USAID prevails and the agency’s interventions are often seen as “top-down” or “command-in-control” when other stakeholders identify priorities different from USAID. Former Deputy Assistant Administrator, Global Bureau and Director, Center for Democracy and Governance Chuck Costello explained, “you can not have the results of participation determine the outcomes.”³¹ He said agency priorities are often different from local partners and there is a big disconnect between USAID and the beneficiaries of the programs. In his current position as the director of The Carter Center’s Democracy Program in which is he is directs multiple USAID-funded projects, he views USAID’s need for accountability creating a relationship of control and micro-management with his program, specifically on a project for civil society strengthening and rule of law work in Guyana. Diane La Voy, former Senior Policy Advisor for Participatory Development at USAID, described the relationship as one of statistical Venn diagrams in which USAID tries to “find the biggest amount of overlap – the most honorable and feasible space” between the goals of the agency and its counterparts.³²

In addition, Jill Buckley of USAID describes the challenge of working with non-Congressional stakeholders and recommends USAID should “try to get other stakeholders or constituency groups to work with us in a more participatory and teamlike fashion. They would like to...have a much greater say over what we do and how we do

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Phone interview with Chuck Costello.

³² Phone interview with Diane La Voy.

it. They would like to persuade us to work in their area and abandon other areas. Trying to maintain some kind of balance in working with them is almost more challenging than working with the Congress.”³³

Performance Monitoring and Evaluation

Consistent with GPRA, USAID’s operating units were required to prepare a Performance Monitoring Plan (PMP), a management technique of the private sector. A PMP is a “critical tool for planning, managing, and documenting data collection...that contributes to the effectiveness of the performance monitoring system by assuring that comparable data will be collected on a regular and timely basis.”³⁴ The agency integrated participatory values into PMPs and guided employees to use participatory approaches and “involve USAID’s partners, customers, and stakeholders in planning approaches to monitoring performance.”³⁵ Additionally, the agency required staff to conduct participatory evaluations that include the active involvement of partners, customers, and interested parties. Unlike traditional evaluation approaches, participatory evaluations are “oriented to the information needs of program stakeholders rather than of the donor agency” and helps build participants’ “ownership and commitment to the results..., and empowers (them) to act on the knowledge gained.”³⁶ Participatory evaluation focus on learning where traditional evaluations focus on accountability.

Conclusions

Participatory methods of development radically alter the relationship between the donor agency and the people impacted by its projects. This new approach, based on principles of empowerment of stakeholders and project sustainability, changes accountability for the

³³ Buckley, Jill. *The Participation Forum (No. 17): Real-World Participation Issues: Teamwork, Time Pressures, and Personalist Politics: Participation on Capitol Hill*. Washington, DC: USAID, 1996.

³⁴ *Preparing a Performance Monitoring Plan: Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Tips*. Washington, DC: USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation, 1996.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Conducting a Participatory Evaluation: Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Tips*. Washington, DC: USAID Center for Development Information and Evaluation, 1996.

donor agency by creating additional accountability relationships with new and different actors. The increased number of stakeholders and their relative level of power and influence over development projects creates new horizontal accountability relationships for the donor agency that co-exist with vertical accountability relationships of the agency that emerged from the traditional approach.

Subsequently, participatory approaches entangle development agencies' accountability into a complex web of relationships with many new and different actors whose expectations and goals for the development project vary across agencies, nations, and cultures. The agency struggles to implement participatory approaches and remain accountable to its partners from traditional methods because with the new approach, accountability is no longer linear. Developing performance indicators to measure results do not always capture qualitative values such as empowerment, learning, inclusion, partnership, and ownership. These relationships are further complicated by the informal and formal relationships between the agency and its stakeholders who are now empowered to participate in decision-making processes, but whose influence is reduced when their priorities clash with those of the agency.

For national development agencies, like USAID, these methods help to reach consensus by the host country and agency about development priorities for assistance agreements. Participatory techniques not only promote USAID's core values of customer focus and teamwork, but they provide value to customers who have the opportunity to share their expertise and use their skills. In addition, this approach will help sustain projects in the long-run because lasting change occurs from the bottom-up when stakeholders enjoy some degree of ownership in meeting their country's development goals.

It is important to note, however, that USAID's new partners formally have limited power to influence development programming. While USAID's commitment to participation provides them the opportunity to express their views, participation is a consultative process that empowers them to influence decisions for the agency, but not to make them. Because USAID is accountable to the U.S. government, its most important stakeholder

with the power to cut funding, the agency has to comply with its broader agency goals, as a U.S. government agency.

Despite these tensions participation creates for USAID and others, development agencies should not abandon these techniques in any stage of the development project because this approach is invaluable to people of developing nations. These representative and democratic approaches to development create opportunities for vulnerable populations by helping them gain access to power, decision-making processes, and policy formulation. Empowerment allows more people in developing nations to have greater control over resources and take ownership in programs that affect their lives. Participatory techniques help to bridge gaps in stakeholder expectations that otherwise leave the development agency unaccountable to its clients – those people impacted by its programs.

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